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ABSTRACT

Forty nonclinical psychology graduate students participated in brief small-group interchanges designed as psychotherapy analogues. The interaction was rated by trained judges, and the "clients" in the simulations also rated "therapist" empathy. The most powerful predictor of client-rated empathy was gender, with women receiving higher empathy scores. The next most powerful predictors were measures of academic achievement. Observer-rated empathy was not significantly predicted by any of the measures used. The greater perceived empathy of the female graduate students may reflect the greater comfort of both sexes in talking with women, or it may reflect the sex-role training of women. The findings also suggest that, while high scores on academic achievement measures predict empathy, "highly abstract" people may have difficulty communicating their empathic understanding. (Author/CS)

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The Prediction of Therapeutic Empathy in Nonclinical Psychologists

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Footnote

This paper was presented at the Annual meeting of the Western Psychological Association, Honolulu, Hawaii, May 6, 1980. Requests for reprints should be sent to Angus Strachan, Department of Psychology, UCLA, Los Angeles, California 90024.

Running Head: Prediction of Empathy

Recently, there have been several studies of the prediction of graduate student academic success in psychology (e.g. Goldbert, 1977; Hirschberg & Itkin, 1978). These studies have looked at success in terms of such variables as time taken to finish the degree, and type and number of publications after the doctorate, rather than in terms of clinical helping skills, skills which one would expect to be greater for psychology graduate students by virtue of their interest in people. It seems particularly important to study the empathy of non-clinical psychologists in light of the increasing numbers of non-clinical psychologists becoming licensed after completing their doctorate. This paper reports on the prediction of therapeutic empathy scores obtained in an analogue helping task, the "Group Assessment of Interpersonal Traits" (Goodman, 1972), from preadmission and graduate academic performance, and is part of a larger study of psychology graduate student training.

Fifty-four non-clinical students from the first four years of graduate school participated in the GAIT, which produces a short segment of help-intended interaction. Briefly, a small group (four people in this study) meets and each person takes turns to be either a "therapist" or a "client" in a five-minute interchange designed as a psychotherapy analogue. The "client" discusses a personal concern and the "therapist" helps him or her explore this concern. Each person has a turn in each role and ratings are made on each other by the participants and the session is recorded to be rated later by trained observers. In this study, the interaction was recorded and empathy

ratings made by five trained judges with a combined reliability of .91 (Cronbach's alpha). The "client" also rated the "therapist's" empathy, using the Barret-Lennard (1962) Relationship Inventory. The Chapin Social Insight Test was also administered. Measurements of academic achievements were obtained from student files--for example, undergraduate GPA, GRE and MAT sc ores. The data were analyzed using Multiple Regression on forty subjects (14 were eliminated due to missing data).

Using the "client's" rating of the "therapist's" empathy as the outcome criterion, it was found that GRE scores and SIT scores did not significantly predict outcome. The most powerful predictor (see Table 1) was gender, with women having significantly higher empathy scores ($p<0.01$). The next most powerful predictors were the undergraduate GPA ($p<0.05$), and the inverse of the MAT score ($p<0.05$). (The critical F values were chosen conservatively as though all 14 predictor variables were in the regression equation.) These three predictors produced a Multiple-R of 0.68. Interestingly, observer-rated empathy was not significantly predicted by any of these measures. Using the "client's" rating of the "therapist's" genuineness as the outcome criterion (see Table 2), it was found that undergraduate GPA significantly predicted genuineness, and that the prediction of genuineness by self-rated helpfulness was marginally significant when evaluated against a less conservative F value. Overall though, the total prediction from the regression was not distinguishable from zero.

This study suggests that ratings of empathy made by "clients" of non-clinical psychologists acting in a "therapist" role are predicted by gender, achievement and ability measures. This finding contrasts with previous findings such as that of Bergin and Solomon (1970) who found that academic credentials bore a slight (and non-significant) negative relationship to the facilitative conditions offered by post-internship psychology trainees in real psychotherapy. The present study suggests that the greater perceived empathy of female graduate students may reflect the greater comfort of both sexes when talking with women, or actually increased levels of empathy displayed by women as a result of sex-role training. The other predictors suggest that high achievement predicts empathy, but that highly abstract people may have difficulty communicating this understanding. Overall, these results suggest that gender, as well as academic achievement measures, predict the success of non-clinical psychology students as therapeutic agents.

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Table 1

Barret-Lennard Ratings of Psychology Students' Empathy

as Predicted by Multiple Regression

a) Beta weights

Variable	Beta	F
Sex	0.430	11.61**
Undergraduate GPA	0.328	4.65*
Skill Rating[a]	0.209	2.83
MAT score	-0.602	5.51*
GRE (Verbal)	0.419	3.24
GPA (Psychology)	0.247	2.04

Notes: Sample size = 40

Multiple R = 0.729

R Squared = 0.531

R Squared (Adjusted for shrinkage) = 0.446

[a]Recommender's rating of interpersonal skill

*$p < .05$, F critical (1,25) = 4.24

**$p < .01$, F critical (1,25) = 7.77

b) ANOVA for the Regression

Factor	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F
Regression	6	20.708	3.451	6.227**
Residual	33	18.292	0.554	

Table 2

Barrett-Lennard Ratings of Psychology Students' Genuineness as Predicted by Multiple Regression

a) Beta weights

Variable	Beta	F
Undergraduate GPA	0.347	5.556*
Helpfulness[a]	0.301	4.117*
Year[b]	0.171	1.517

Notes: Sample size = 40

Multiple R = 0.476

R Squared = 0.227

R Squared (Adjusted for shrinkage) = 0.162

[a]Self-rating of helpfulness during the interaction

[b]Year in graduate program

*$p < .05$, F critical (1,36) = 4.11

b) ANOVA for the Regression

Factor	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F
Regression	3	8.842	2.947	3.518
Residual	36	30.158	0.838	